

**"Third World" Female Experience in Africa and the  
USA as represented in Four Novels by  
Yvonne Vera and Toni Morrison.**

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## STATEMENT

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature

Date

## ABSTRACT

The following thesis aims to place black, female experience at the centre of an analysis of four main texts. These texts are Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* and *Without a Name* as well as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. By comparing and analysing these four novels, also utilising selected works from various theorists such as bell hooks and Chandra Mohanty, "mainstream" feminist theory is interrogated. Different political and social contexts are examined from the perspectives of writers and theorists that have conventionally been relegated to the margins of literary theory. The experiences of black people all over the world are marginalised and this thesis attempts to examine these texts without assuming that the experiences of the characters are "different" or "other". The first chapter focuses mainly on Morrison's *Song of Solomon* but used Vera's *Nehanda* to comment on some spiritual similarities between an African female character and an African American female character. Chapter two focuses more strongly on African, specifically Zimbabwean, female experience during the second war of independence (or Chimurenga) in Zimbabwe.

## OPSOMMING

*Solomon*, maar maak gebruik van Vera se *Nehanda* om Die tesis analiseer vier hooftekste vanuit die perspektief van swart, vroulike ervaring. Die tekste is Yvonne Vera se *Nehanda* en *Without a Name*, sowel as Toni Morrison se *Song of Solomon* en *Beloved*. Hierdie vier romans word vergelyk en ook, met die hulp van geselekteerde werke van verskeie teoretici soos bell hooks en Chandra Mohanty, geanaliseer in 'n poging om "hoofstroom" feministiese teorie krities te benader. Verskillende sosiaal-politiese kontekste word ondersoek, spesifiek vanuit die perspektiewe van skrywers en teoretici wat konvensioneel gesproke gereduseer is tot die marges van literêre teorie. Teen die agtergrond van die gemarginaliseerde ervaringe van swart mense regoor die wêreld, probeer die tesis om hierdie tekste te analiseer sonder om te aanvaar dat die ervaringe van die karakters "verskillend" of "anders" is. Die eerste hoofstuk fokus hoofsaaklik op Morrison se *Song of* kommentaar te lewer op die spirituele ooreenkomste tussen 'n swart vroulike karakter uit Afrika en 'n Afro-Amerikaanse vroulike karakter. Hoofstuk twee fokus skerp op 'n Afrika, en spesifiek Zimbabwiese, vroulike ervaring gedurende die tweede onafhanklikheidsoorlog in daardie land.

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## Introduction

When one peruses apparently comprehensive readers dealing explicitly with feminist theory the lack of attention given to African and African American women writers, as well as the neglect by editors of theoretical work that actually does exist in this area, is evident. Black, female experience remains separated from the mainstream canon of feminist theory and this absence is blatant when one undertakes reading in this area. Oddly, this absence is also often acknowledged, but the question as to why black feminist theory and thought remains isolated from what one can term "mainstream" feminist theory needs to be interrogated and investigated. The fact remains that white experience is situated at the centre of most analyses of any aspect of social or political experience. In my thesis I aim to place the black female writer, as well as her characters, at the centre of the discussion. One African American writer, namely Toni Morrison, and one African writer, Yvonne Vera from Zimbabwe, will be discussed in detail, utilizing two novels from each writer. By focussing specifically on the primary text and by examining the women who feature in those texts, I hope to expose and examine aspects of feminist theory and thought that have been neglected, overlooked or discussed in terms of the kind of theory that dominates (literary)

textual considerations. I will also be paying attention to common ground that exists between African and African American women writers due to the fact that, as well as gender prejudice, they also experience economic and racial prejudice. The vital links between race, class and gender in defining and explaining female experience will be closely examined using certain texts written by Gay Young, Bette Dickerson and bell hooks. These texts are *Color, Class and Country: Experiences of Gender* edited by Young and Dickerson and two texts of hooks's, namely *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* and *Class Matters: Where We Stand*. Chandra Mohanty's writing on third world women, specifically in her introduction to the collection of essays she edited titled *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, is also relevant. It will be used in making a comparison between the contexts of the novels to be examined.

The four novels that will be discussed all include prominent female characters. These novels are Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* and Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* and *Without a Name*. *Without a Name* and *Song of Solomon* will be discussed in more detail than the other two. Other relevant fictional texts will also be used to help illustrate certain points as well as to broaden the scope of these points in the context that has been



established. By discussing Toni Morrison alongside Yvonne Vera I hope to examine the writing of two women with an African heritage who also exist in very different contexts from each other, as well as from those female theorists and individuals who largely define and structure "mainstream" feminist thought. The fact remains that even though Vera and Morrison live in third and first world countries respectively, ethnicity, as well as class, have impacted on their relationship to and experiences of gender differently from the way it is experienced by white women who also exist within these contexts. The first chapter of this thesis will be dealing with the gaps that exist between European based feminist thought and black feminist thought in the United States. The second chapter will focus more closely on the links between black feminist fiction in the United States and in Africa.

In Mary Evans's book titled *Introducing Contemporary Feminist Thought* very little reference is made to versions of feminism where "whiteness" is not at the centre. Evans is explicitly aware of this omission. She comments on it in the following passage taken from her book, but does not engage in any discussion of it and makes no real attempt to counter it in her writing in this particular book.

It was this undisclosed, and unspoken, agenda [access to white, middle class privilege] that was to become - and remain - a deeply contentious issue within feminism. Socialist feminist historians [. . .] had demonstrated the difficulty of assuming a single feminist vision or programme. Working-class women, they argued, might well have wished to stay out of the labour force rather than be in it, since what was not available to them, unlike middle-class women, was professional or white collar employment. Equally, black women contested the very perimeters of white feminism as a whole: Hazel Carby in Britain and Angela Davis in the United States were amongst those who raised difficult questions about the different degrees of privilege and/or exploitation made possible through social systems that were based not just on social divisions, but on racial divisions as well. (61)

Differences in female perspectives are alluded to here but Evans does not actively engage in a discussion of them. It is, however, in these differences, particularly racial ones, that my interest lies. The predominant concern that white women have and have had in their gender battle with white men is that they wanted and were fighting to gain "access to the privileged masculine condition" (Evans 61). As stated earlier, black women have had more prejudices to overcome. In this particular piece Evans comments on the way social class impacts on the possibilities that women have in terms of mobility in society. She comments on the different outlooks and

desires of working class as contrasted with middle class women and goes on to state that even larger disparities arise when the issue of race is introduced. These issues, namely the inter-relatedness of race, gender and class, are discussed in detail in the collection of papers edited by Bette J. Dickerson and Gay Young mentioned earlier in the introduction. This collection is named after a conference held at The American University, Washington DC, in 1990. This conference was organised and held to convey the commitment that the department of sociology at this same university had in taking seriously the relationships between gender, race and class (Young and Dickerson 1).

I am going to introduce the discussion of these issues by discussing Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" which reveals clearly the influence that these elements have on the day to day lives of women of colour, particularly on the Southern, African-American woman who is the speaker in the poem. This poem expresses the breadth and depth of the obstacles black women in the United States come up against. The white male is the initial oppressive force mentioned in the poem but the speaker goes on to describe how she lives triumphantly as if she has the same economic, racial, and sexual privileges as the most privileged individuals in society:

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise (ll. 1-4)

In this stanza the female, black speaker is addressing those who have been writing history, particularly the history of the United States, namely white men. She is criticising the fact that their incorrect and prejudiced representations ("bitter, twisted lies [l.2]) of history, including hers, are an act of oppression. However, the image of dust functions here as a very positive one. As the oppressor treads her into "the very dirt" (l.3), the inevitability is that dust will be created. From the treading in the dirt results the speaker's "ris[ing]" and her eventual emancipation. The act of oppression itself will lead to the speaker's "ris[ing]".

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin in my own back yard. (ll. 16-20)

In this stanza the speaker is pointing the reader's attention to the fact that she perceives her wealth as internal rather than external. It is connected to attitude rather than economic fact. This reveals that the

kind of deprivation she has been subjected to has meant that her wealth, if she is going to feel that she has any, must be something less tangible. Her belief in her having wealth, even of an abstract kind, contrasts with the spiritual or emotional barrenness that is suggested as being common to those that do oppress, for example by describing the presumably white male addressee "you" (l. 1), as "bitter" (l. 2). Bitterness is associated with spite and hate, which do not make for spiritual health. The laughter that the speaker has continues in spite of the fact that she is economically oppressed and most probably impoverished. There are various characters in the novels to be discussed that can be examined while keeping the attitude of the speaker in Angelou's poem in mind, particularly Pilate in *Song of Solomon*.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs? (ll. 25-28)

In this stanza the speaker celebrates the value of her sexual self. The oppressor she addresses here can be assumed to include both the white and the black man. She does not hide or deny her overt sexuality, but embraces it joyously and is proud of it. She refuses to be sexually oppressed in terms of her attitude towards her

body. By using the image of diamonds to describe her sexual anatomy she reveals how she views this as yet another source of great wealth or treasure that she has that is not derived from an external source.

This poem very successfully points to the kinds of obstacles that black women in America, as well as in Africa, have had to encounter and live with, and in the speaker's case, have overcome. Kathryn B. Ward's paper in *Color, Class and Country* titled " 'Lifting as We Climb': How Scholarship by and about Women of Color Has Shaped My Life as a White Feminist", discusses the process of her becoming aware of her own limited vision of the general plight of women in an oppressive society, due to her explicitly white perspective on female experience. She discusses Bonnie Thornton Dill's (1988) notion of survival as resistance and this idea is highly relevant in examining how the speaker in Angelou's poem resists oppression. Part of Thornton Dill's work examines alternative ways that black women choose to resist, and the speaker in "Still I Rise" has most definitely carved out her own attitude toward resistance and her own plan of action, even though this action may be attitudinal rather than explicitly concrete. The following extract from Young and Dickerson's Introduction comments on the

relevance of keeping the three elements of race, gender and class in mind when examining any one of the three.

The emerging analysis of the relation of gender to other forms of domination has expanded the category of gender and provided new direction in feminist thinking - too long restricted by the experience of white, middle-class, Western women (Childers and hooks 1990; Hirsch and Fox Keller 1990). Moreover, the insight that we neither experience nor can understand gender independently of other hierarchies implies that the entire matrix of domination is crucial to feminism (Spelman 1988). (1)

It is extremely important that the main differences between various groups of women are acknowledged. It is clear that certain "feminisms" are granted more validity than others. This is a consequence of the ethnicity, class and gender of those that are looking and judging. Black feminism is described and analysed in terms of mainstream feminism. It is defined according to that "norm".

There is now wider acknowledgment that the phrase "women as women" really refers to women who are white and middle-class in Western industrialised countries. And like privileged men before them, these dominant few engaged in faulty generalizations that not only conflated their own situation with the situation of all women but also validated themselves as the norm, the ideal. (Young and Dickerson 4)

By discussing the representation of female, black characters by female, black writers the concerns, priorities, values and perspectives of these writers writing out of particular contexts can be examined free from the defining limits of the "feminist canon". The "norm" is taken for granted in that canon, just as "whiteness" is seen as something neutral or "normal" and anything different from that is made distinct. The very fact that the term "feminism" is used to define the feminist movement beginning in Europe, and that a feminism that applies directly to black experience takes a different name, such as black feminism or "womanism" (Walker *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* xi-xii), reveals the extent to which it has been made distinct from the apparently superior, "mainstream" theory. In a word, it has been "othered", or, more accurately perhaps, has had to "other" itself, so that it can have an identity in its own right. In a discussion of what postmodernism does to such "metanarratives", Weedon says the following:

Power relations of class, sexism, heterosexism and racism have ensured that it [power] has been largely [in the hands of] white, Western, middle- and upper-class men who have *defined meaning*, controlled economies and determined the nature of relations between East and West and North and South. In the process, women, all people of colour and non-white Western nations have been defined as different and implicitly or explicitly inferior. (5)



In the four novels dealt with in this thesis common themes, such as those of "people" (for instance an identification with some kind of community) and the issue of naming will be examined, as the writers' treatment of these issues point to very strong links between black feminisms on different continents, as well as highlighting some definite differences between American black culture and African black culture, here specifically Zimbabwean culture. Most importantly, however, an analysis with the black female at the centre will be made to counter the one-sided analyses that have typified most aspects of literary theory and analysis.

White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state. (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 4)

The following analyses are going to be explicitly aware of the aforementioned factors, examining their effects on characters that have varied levels of direct contact with those that oppress them. The system that sustains their oppression is inescapable and their responses to those circumstances will be analysed. Maurice Vambe cites the following passage from an essay by Gikandi in his piece

titled "Spirit possession and the paradox of post-colonial resistance in Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*":

To write is to claim a text of one's own; textuality is an instrument of territorial repossession; because the other confers on us an identity that alienates us from ourselves, narrative is crucial to the discovery of our selfhood. The text is the mirror in which the subject will see itself reflected. (Gikandi, Qtd in Vambe 129)

The idea discussed in this quotation is used in Vambe's discussion of *Nehanda*. It comments on how Vera's re-writing of the story of Nehanda the Shona spirit medium, through memory (as the information was traditionally communicated orally), means that it is being claimed, for the first time, by a black woman in a patriarchal and racist society. All the female characters discussed in this thesis are attempting to survive in a society that marginalises them twice. Their situation in their own communities means that they are oppressed because of gender, and the colonial powers that are explicitly present in all novels oppress them because they are black. All four texts are examples of "claims" made. Morrison and Vera attempt to claim their territories. Vera's characters are trying to get theirs back, whilst Morrison's are trying to make a place for themselves in a society that had no intention of ever allowing their communities to become integrated.

## Chapter 1

As stated in the introduction one of the aims of this thesis is to place black, female experience at the centre of an analysis of four primary texts, keeping class, race and gender as the focal areas of discussion. In the two Morrison novels to be discussed the focus is placed on a black community living in a white supremacist context, even though the actual presence of white people is rarely regarded in the text. The awareness of white power and racism within the community is very real, even though there are few white characters that feature in any way in the novels. However, what is common to both novels, and what is vitally important to note in examining these texts and the histories that they attempt to re-build or re-capture, is the fact that the novelist (as is true also of the characters within the stories) is attempting to reconcile present lives with a past that has not been documented in a traditionally Western fashion. In both novels there is a very strong tendency towards establishing or re-establishing a sense of community that has been broken or lost for a time. The breakdown of these ties, represented as crucial in the novels, happened for many different reasons. By keeping gender, race and class at the centre of a discussion of these novels Morrison aids the reader in analysing and

understanding the characters, their lives and their circumstances. In all the novels the main characters face a legacy of racism and oppression. In *Song of Solomon* (Morrison 1977), the male protagonist, Milkman, makes a journey that enables him to understand and appreciate his origins and the journeys that his family members have made.

In this novel the female characters dominate even though the main character is male. Milkman, the character that the reader follows throughout the novel, is influenced very strongly by three women, namely, his aunt Pilate, his mother Ruth and his cousin, Hagar, who also becomes his lover for the larger part of twelve years. Morrison's novel traces the search for identity that Milkman makes, but the degree of the success of this search cannot be separated from his contact with these women. His search for his "people" (Morrison *Song of Solomon* 229) enables him to form and solidify his own identity that, until this journey, had not defined itself in its own right. He had always identified himself in terms of others, most obviously in terms of his father, whose name he shares. Macon senior's inability and determination to cut all ties with his sister prevents him from being part of his community.

Pilate is not represented as someone who is often in the company of those within the community but her sure sense of herself and her history lead to her being perceived as an individual who is better integrated in her community than her wealthy brother. One senses that she is respected, as people are aware of and often afraid of her power. Ruth's respect for Pilate is clear as in times of need it is Pilate that she seeks. When Hagar is trying to kill Milkman Ruth decides to talk to Pilate about it to find out if rumours around town are true. Ruth thinks to herself: "She needed Pilate's calm view, her honesty and equilibrium. Then she would know what to do" (135). When the travelling work gang that Pilate works for after she and Macon went their separate ways realise that she doesn't have a navel they ask her to leave. However, they "left [her] with more than her share of earnings, because the women did not want her to go away angry. They thought she might hurt them in some way if she got angry . . ." (144). Pilate's power and "otherworldliness" are respected and acknowledged here. The character of Nehanda in Vera's novel of the same name is also a woman that is perceived as powerful in her society. Nehanda is a spirit medium and her body and mind house the spirit of the ancestor. Her power is illustrated by the fact that the white authorities that are fighting the population that they are trying to control are aware that, to defeat the

people, they need to find and kill Nehanda. She is leading the people in their rebellion and her power cannot be questioned.

Macon is accepted in his community because he is rich and very powerful. He is also perceived as dangerous due to the fact that he owns many of the homes that shelter the black population of this particular town. bell hooks's comments on class are very useful in examining Morrison's portrayal of Macon Dead as, even though he has race in common with "his" community, a definitive and desired class differential exists between Dead and the poorer black people in this community. This is clear in the following conversation between Milkman and Guitar, his best friend, where they discuss Macon as well as the secret organisation, the Seven Days, of which Guitar is part. Guitar says:

'But I don't have to tell you that your father is a very strange Negro. He'll reap the benefits of what we [the Seven Days] sow, and there is nothing we can do about that. *He behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man.* As a matter of fact, I'm glad you brought him up. Maybe you can tell me how, after losing everything his own father worked for to some crackers, after *seeing* his father shot down by them, how can he keep his knees bent? Why does he love them so?' . . . 'Look, Guitar. First of all, my father doesn't care whether a white man lives or

swallows lye. He just wants what they have'. (223-224) (my italics)

Here it is clear that Guitar and Milkman have varied understandings of what Macon Dead senior's relationship to and attitude toward white people is. Milkman seems to understand his father's motivations more accurately. Macon Dead is attempting to improve his class position and has succeeded, through marriage and professional determination, to increase his economic power. Macon does not care about white people, let alone love them, as Guitar suggests. What Macon wants is access to the power and privilege that white people enjoy. However, he oppresses other blacks to do so, as his successful attempts to gain power and wealth perpetuate a capitalist system that requires poor, powerless individuals as its base. There must be poor people so that there can be rich people. Macon is only interested in being a rich person.

In her book, *Class Matters: Where We Stand*, bell hooks discusses the problem of intra-race oppression motivated by an immense need to succeed financially as well as to be comfortable materially. In this book hooks discusses the drug culture that has emerged within poor, particularly black, communities in the United States. She argues that the culture of greed and indulgence that is



prevalent at all levels in a capitalist country has penetrated these communities due to advertising and other such influences. What has resulted is:

[an] infiltration into previously stable communities, especially black communities, [of] a predatory capitalist-based drug culture that would bring money for luxuries to a few, a symbolic ruling class. (hooks, *Class Matters* 66)

The point made by hooks parallels Morrison's depiction of Macon's power over many people within his community, as he is needed in the same way that drug dealers are "needed". Macon provides people with places to live. If he takes that away he threatens their very survival. If a dealer stops supplying his or her addicts, a similar kind of power is being exercised. Macon Dead is focussed on improving his class position and, in relation to his community, he is at the top of the food chain. Guitar comments on Macon's apparent attitude toward white people but in the novel, as already mentioned, there is very little direct contact with whites. However, the presence of an oppressive system that many characters feel strongly about constantly hovers around the narrative, and the establishment of an organisation such as the "Seven Days" reveals the extent to which this oppression affects the lives of the black community that we, as



readers, are immersed in. The passage from *Song of Solomon* cited below reveals how this lust for wealth has rubbed off on Milkman as well as showing how black communities themselves advocate and rejoice in evidence of upward social movement of individuals that they know.

Milkman has made his way to Georgia where his aunt and father farmed with their father. He is searching for the gold that Pilate and Macon found in the hunters' cave where they hid after their father had been murdered. Milkman has met the town reverend and finds that he remembers his family.

The salt taste was back in his [Milkman's] mouth and he was so agitated by what he believed, hoped, he would find there [the gold], he had to put his hands on warm stone to dry them. He thought of the pitiful hungry eyes of the old men, their eagerness for some word of defiant success accomplished by the son of Macon Dead; and of the white men who strutted through the orchards and ate the Georgia peaches after they shot his grandfather's head off.  
(Morrison 250)

This passage expresses the complicated nature of the position Milkman finds himself in. In some ways he is allied to Macon senior as he feels the injustice of the death of his grandfather at the hands of racist, greedy

white people. However, Milkman's lust for the gold is partially triggered by his need to be independent from his father and his father's money. Milkman views financial independence as essential for personal independence (that is one of the reasons why this journey is so important to him; he actually does something on his own) and he feels contemptuous toward his father because of the financial control he is able to exercise. Throughout the journey he is aware of the fact that it is Macon's money that is paying for everything. Luckily, this does not continue to preoccupy him as other aspects of the journey become more important. For example, he notices how the concept of a people stretches over time and space. He feels almost shy about the fact that his family is still thought about and now, due to the information brought by himself, is remembered with pride. He and his family are considered to be an extended part of the community that he has now encountered for the first time. Macon's relationship to money is similar to Milkman's at this stage, because Macon understands that in a society like theirs an absence of money leads to an absence of independence and self-determination. It is Pilate who leads Milkman to a real understanding of community, and makes him see how this concept really does extend over space and time, and between the living and the dead.

The impact of class divisions within this community is also interesting if one recognises the fact that Milkman's heightening of awareness takes place partially as a consequence of his contact with the female characters in the novel. By contrasting the homes of Ruth, Milkman's mother, and of Pilate, certain aspects of their characters and histories emerge. By observing these differences certain points about their respective relationships to class materialise. Pilate's home, in which she settles after years and years of moving around, is almost bare in terms of material items. There is no electricity, the beds are home-made and they do not have an inside toilet.

She [Pilate] opened the door and they [Milkman and Guitar] followed her into a large sunny room that looked both barren and cluttered. A moss-green sack hung from the ceiling. Candles were stuck in bottles everywhere; newspaper articles and magazine pictures were nailed to the walls. But other than a rocking chair, two straight-backed chairs, a large table, a sink and stove, there was no furniture. Pervading everywhere was the odor of pine and fermenting fruit. (39)

This is a shock to Milkman who is used to a very different domestic space. The priorities of the inhabitants here are very different from those of

Milkman's immediate family. The focal point of the room, the moss-green sack, is what Pilate calls her inheritance. It is important to her as it contains rocks and stones that she has collected from all the places she has lived. Contrary to an item such as this, the focal point of Milkman's home is the vast dining room table, which can be seen to represent wealth, as well as upper middle class values. The fact that Ruth's father was a professional man, a doctor, and the only black one in town at that, results in Ruth's home reflecting that fact. Macon was attracted to Ruth largely because of her wealth and Macon keeps up the appearance and luxury of their home as he is strongly motivated by the desire to claim ownership of material things, such as the property he owns all over town. The composition and appearance of these homes marks the vast difference between the paths chosen by the siblings, namely Macon and Pilate, after the violent death of their father. Macon makes the decision to own property and to focus on money. Pilate is drawn toward a life of few material attachments and of subsistence. Her focus is on that which cannot be seen or bought. The following passage illustrates these differences that Macon Dead is explicitly aware of. He knows exactly what his methodology has been and why he has chosen it. He says the following in a conversation with Milkman:

"Boy, you got better things to do with your time. Besides it's time you started learning how to work. You start Monday. After school come to my office; work a couple of hours there and learn what's real. Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too." (55)

This passage relates closely to hooks's discussion of the power of the drug culture within poor, black, American communities. Macon is *aiming* to own people. He wants them to be dependent on him as this gives him control over their lives. If he can control others then he feels he has authentic control over his own life. In Marilyn Mobley's essay titled "Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" the following comment is made:

My discussion argues for a [. . .] closer examination of the concept of community in the novel to illuminate how the text deconstructs generally accepted, yet reductive notions of the black community as a single-voiced whole, at the same time that it reconstructs it as a dynamic, complex, multivoiced network of ongoing dialogues. (42)

After examining Macon's words in the extract from page fifty five, Mobley's point is seen to be extremely

relevant. She is suggesting that other readings of *Song of Solomon* have been too closely occupied with analysing Milkman's journey in relation to his community, rather than examining the intricacies of the actual community represented. Her comment here links very well with the points that hooks makes because class differences do not allow the black community to operate as a whole, even though those looking in from the outside may like to think that it does. Macon has no interest in his community. He sees them as an opportunity to make money and he is unable to relate to them in any other way. Macon has a lust for power and this obsessive search for power is based on his past that specifically lacked power. It also links to his complete absence of sexual desire for his wife. He and Ruth have been sexually estranged for decades and his professional ruthlessness could be read as a form of compensation. His desire is transferred to his professional life as it is here that he accomplishes what he wants to and where he satisfies some of his primary needs. On the contrary, Pilate is largely free from any lustful human or material attachments.

The impact that Pilate has on the lives of both Macon and Milkman points to aspects of her character that are interesting and revealing in terms of what she, as a

character, signifies within this novel. Pilate's complete lack of a need for material possessions and economic wealth exposes a stark contrast between others who are willing to accept a conventional life determined by political and economic convention. In the chapter titled "Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*" in Barthold's book *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States of America*, Pilate's role in the novel is described as that of a "traditional Priestess, an intermediary between the spiritual and material world, a Keeper of Time whose role is as much intuitive as conscious" (Barthold 179). Pilate is a character who has transcended worldly concerns in most aspects of her life and it seems to be this freedom and strength that draw Macon and Milkman to her, as these are the characteristics that they both lack and crave. Her inheritance turns out to be the bones of her father, as well as the pieces of earth that she has collected and carried with her. The bones form a part of her inheritance because her father 'called' her, she 'heard' him, and the result was that she fetched his unburied bones. She loyally carried them with her until she settled, and they settled with her. She was unaware of the fact that they were her father's bones but she did as he told her without question. "Inheritance" would have a completely different meaning and significance in the



lives of Macon and Milkman. By the end of the novel the reader can, however, feel sure that Milkman has learned to understand and value Pilate's concept of what an inheritance is.

As stated earlier, the character of Nehanda also has a close link to the world of the spirits. Pilate's communication is particularly with her father and it is this ability in her that helps her to communicate with others, as well as open the eyes of others. Nehanda's role in Vera's novel has a wider scope than Pilate's in Morrison's, as Nehanda is actually controlling military operations in the fight against white colonisation. In the following passage from Vera's text (*Nehanda* 1993), a soldier comes to Nehanda to report back as well as to ask advice:

'Like the wind we [the soldiers] have swept through the land, attacking every stranger on our path. Meanwhile, they have attacked us with guns, but we have persisted.'

The man waves a long spear covered with blood. In his left hand he carries a gun. He kneels on one knee as he sings praises to Nehanda, who has protected him as he moved through the settlements of the strangers.

'Tell us great spirit. Shall we survive the retaliation of the stranger?' one man asks, his voice filled with trepidation. He has seen how quickly a man dies from the gun.

'Do not take anything that belongs to the stranger.'



. . Take only the guns. If you touch anything else that belongs to him, even the spirits shall be offended. The spirits will abandon you for such a travesty.' (79)

It is interesting to note that both Nehanda and Pilate play an enormous advisory or didactic role in the lives of men, particularly due to the fact that they have important insights that the others lack. Here Nehanda displays her spiritual integrity, as well as her acknowledgement of the fact that to be successful her army needs to be able to fight in the same way as the opposition. She allows her soldiers to take guns, as she knows that without them they are sure to fail. She retains spiritual integrity by not allowing the soldiers to become involved in any other contact with the possessions of their enemy. The speech of the man reveals the extent to which Nehanda is depended on, as well as respected. Nehanda responds to him clearly, and in no uncertain terms. Pilate's ability to communicate, as well as decide, is very similar. Both of these women are able to enforce their spiritual knowledge clearly and efficiently. Nehanda's importance in Zimbabwean culture was still felt in the later war of independence, the Second Chimurenga, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. The following passage discusses the relevance spirit mediums had in this war, which links with Vera's representation of Nehanda's military and

spiritual significance. It is taken from *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War: Volume One* (edited by Bhebe and Ranger), but specifically from Josiah Tungamirai's article "Recruitment to ZANLA: Building up a War Machine". (This volume will be used more extensively in the next chapter.)

In the north-east of the country voluntary recruitment was facilitated by the participation and support of the spirit mediums. For example, when ZANLA fighters arrived in the Dande area they discovered that the tradition of the spirit mediums, Sekuru Kaguvi and Mbuya Nehanda, who had participated effectively in the first *Chimurenga* of 1896-7, was still alive in the 1970s and that the new generation of mediums was equally opposed to the oppressive system of the Rhodesian government. (Tungamirai 41)

The power of this woman in the minds and memory of Zimbabwe's people is quite remarkable. In the novel *Nehanda* is constantly described in terms of her links with the earth as well as her links with the spirits (1). Nehanda is clearly a character that "can fly" (Morrison *Song of Solomon* 336), just as Pilate can fly. She has flown over and through the lives of many Zimbabwean people.

Macon, despite his apparent contempt for Pilate, is drawn to the qualities in Pilate that are spiritual and pure.

The following passage from *Song of Solomon* describes Macon's experience of secretly looking into Pilate's home. The effect this has on him is highly revealing as it points to aspects of Macon that he has consciously repressed in himself. The clash of western versus traditional values is evident in observing Macon's feelings here.

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight. Reba's soft profile, Hagar's hands moving, moving in her heavy hair, and Pilate. He knew her face better than he knew his own. Singing now, her face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered her voice. (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 29)

This scene is highly poignant in that it exposes Macon's emotional barrenness due to the life focus he has chosen. For Macon the scene he witnesses exudes peace and reveals that there are aspects of himself, and types of contact and expression, that he desires, but that he has consciously denied outlet. He "relish[es]" the sight of the scene. There is something there that he has been craving. The narrator is operating as a focaliser here and it is essentially Macon that sees the women as "effortless[ly] beaut[iful]", rather than as low-life

liquor sellers, which he sometimes refers to them as being.

In the course of the novel the narrator points explicitly to similarities that exist between Ruth and Pilate. Their perspectives on life are influenced very strongly by their varying circumstances, but by reading the following passage, it becomes clear that a discussion of both of these women together causes one to notice that Morrison is attributing certain talents, or abilities, to female characters. Both of these women are very different to Macon and their choices in life have led to a development of "different" abilities, as the following quotation makes clear.

They were so different, these two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it. But those were the meaningless things. Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers. (139)

The material differences between the two women are described as "meaningless". Morrison is pointing to the things that all people can potentially have in common,

depending on what they choose for their lives. It is interesting to note that Pilate and Macon had the exact same upbringing but Pilate always had something that Macon did not have. The fact that Pilate "[came] struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water" (27), as her mother had already died before she was born, is highly symbolic in terms of Pilate's function in the community in which she lives, as well as in the novel. Ruth and Pilate had very little contact with each other due to the dispute between Pilate and Macon. Macon is especially bitter about the kind of support Pilate has given to Ruth. First of all, Pilate enabled Ruth to fall pregnant by concocting an aphrodisiac for Macon and the second time she protected the unborn Milkman from his father's determined attempts to have him aborted. The above passage links very interestingly with the discussion previously established around issues of class. Morrison places these two very different women parallel to each other and points to what they have in common spiritually rather than at their circumstantial similarities or differences. The fact that Ruth is initially introduced to the reader as "the dead doctor's daughter" (5) reveals how she is viewed by her community as well as where she is situated class-wise within that community, but Morrison's intention extends beyond making points about

class difference. The narrator points to their "profound" similarities and throughout the novel this depth and possible higher capacity for insight is granted to female characters. Pilate and Ruth's abilities to sense life on different levels and to experience life broadly is a quality that women, as she depicts them, are comfortable with more readily than men. The male characters, even those who have a strong social awareness, such as the men in the "Seven Days", are unable to view life fully or to separate themselves from a merely physical existence. However, as stated earlier, Morrison chooses to make Milkman the individual that holds the history, as well as an arguably profound understanding, of his "people", after Pilate's death. What is expected from men within society, namely to take control, earn a living and be strong, prevents them from concentrating on their deep spirituality. It is only when Milkman separates himself completely from his home and his work that his spiritual self becomes accessible to him.

This choice of the author's, of allowing male characters to evolve and learn, is echoed in the presentation of Mr- in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1983). The character of Albert is introduced in the novel as a nameless abuser, but by the end of the novel he has been

through a traumatic and difficult process of humanization.

After all the evil he [Albert] done I know you [Nettie, Celie's sister] wonder why I don't hate him. I don't hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out himself. I don't mean just that he work and he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience. (Walker, *The Color Purple* 221)

In the above passage Celie, the main character who is married to Albert, is commenting on the changes that she notices in Albert in a letter to her sister Nettie. Walker points to the ability individuals have of turning their lives around as well as the capacity people have for profound forgiveness. The fact that it is a man who has had a "journey of discovery" and that it has been predominantly women, or men that can appreciate women, that have helped encourage and guide him through this process, echoes the development of characters in *Song of Solomon*. In *The Color Purple* Celie is able to spend time with Mr- by focussing on aspects of his behaviour that are humane. The fact that he had the ability to love



another person, someone that Celie is now in love with, allows her to open herself to the possibility that he may be, or become, different from what she had previously known him to be. This encouragement and support of men in their break from a traditionally patriarchal and sexist world view also forms a part of bell hooks's discussion of feminist theory from the perspective of women traditionally placed on the margin by thought and theory represented as mainstream. hooks discusses the race and class issues that separate white men from men of colour, and how this hinders and complicates a view, adopted by many female feminists, that all men are the enemy and that any victory for the women's movement would have to be at the expense of men in general. hooks discusses this in the following passage:

As with other issues, the insistence on a "woman only" feminist movement and a virulent anti-male stance reflected the race and class background of participants. Bourgeois white women, especially radical feminists, were envious and angry at privileged white men for denying them an equal share in class privilege. In part, feminism provided them with a public forum for the expression of their anger as well as a political platform they could use to call attention to issues of social equality, demand change, and promote specific reforms. They were not eager to call attention to the fact that men do not share a common social status; that patriarchy does not negate the existence of class and race privilege or



exploitation; that all men do not benefit equally from sexism. (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 67-68)

It is clear that both Walker and Morrison are interested in including men in the lives of their characters. Ruth and Pilate (in *Song of Solomon*) were rejected by men because these men were unable to accept the unconventionality of their partners. Pilate needs consistently to hide the fact that she has no navel. "[F]or all the years he [Macon] knew her, her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels . . ." (27-28). After the first rejection she continues to be intimate with men but makes sure they never see her stomach. Ruth is rejected by Macon as he suspects her, as Barthold describes in her chapter also cited earlier, of "committ[ing] some unspecified sexual perversity with [her father]" (179) because she holds her father's memory so close to her. Macon was, as a boy and young man, able to accept Pilate's unconventionality and found her to be a real and necessary comfort to him. The passage from *Song of Solomon* cited earlier, with Macon looking into Pilate's home from a distance, exposes his need for her and how strongly he feels her absence in his life, even though it is he who maintains their estrangement. He is

unable, however, to warm to his wife in any way, which pushes her more and more to depending on her children (as well as her dead father) for love and support. Her disturbingly extended nursing relationship with her son, resulting in his nickname due to the fact that the town loud mouth saw her nursing him through her window when he was seven years old, can be read as a response to Macon's rejection of her and her craving for intimacy (134).

Morrison makes the most spiritually evolved character in the novel a woman. Pilate epitomises strength, love and power. At the very end of the novel, which can be viewed as the beginning of Milkman's story as an enlightened and sensitive individual, Milkman thinks the following. "Now he knew why he loved her [Pilate] so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Milkman learns to see this, just as he learns to listen to his past as well as his environment. As the meaning of the "Sugarman" song emerges for him so do other parts of himself, and the world around him, become clear. Due to this heightened awareness, as well as a desire to 'educate' himself in line with what he has learned from Pilate and his journey 'home', it is not surprising that he becomes Pilate's spiritual "heir", as Barthold refers to him as being, in her article (Barthold *Black Time* 181).

By allowing himself to be guided by Pilate and by renouncing certain earthly attachments he is able to commune with his ancestors. This is something Ruth has managed to do with her father. Pilate's ability to perceive herself in terms of her whole history is represented as even more remarkable. Pilate's attitude toward death reveals her alternative view on life and death, and individuals' familial links. She has the following conversation with Ruth in *Song of Solomon*. They are talking about death and Ruth is under the impression that Pilate is in denial about her own father's death. Ruth perceives this death as a fact:

'You saw your own father die, just like I did; you saw him killed. Do you think he wanted to die?'

'I saw Papa shot. Blown off a fence five feet into the air. I saw him wigglin on the ground, but not only did I not see him die, I seen him since he was shot. . . Macon seen him too. After he buried him, after he was blown off that fence. We both seen him. I see him still. He's helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know.'

'What things?'

'All kinds of things. It's a good feelin to know he's around. I tell you he's a person I can always rely on. . . After my Papa was blown off that fence, me and Macon wandered around for a few days until we had a fallin out and I went off on my own. I was about twelve, I think. When I cut out by myself, I headed for Virginia. I thought that I remembered that was where my papa had

people. Or my mother did. Seemed to me like I remembered somebody sayin that.' (140-141)

It is clear from this extract that Pilate distinguishes between the death of a body and the death of an individual spirit or personality. To her it is a very simple concept to grasp, as her contact with her father, after his bodily death, has been regular and tangible. The connection she feels in relation to her ancestors also manifests itself in this passage. As soon as her tie with Macon is broken, she searches for her people. She tries to make her way to her parents' place of origin. It does not matter if the tie is with her father or her mother, but that she has a memory, however vague, of knowing where her family came from, and she relies on that.

Milkman learns to read his environment and to hear what is being communicated to him in ways that are not obvious. Pilate is born with this ability, but it is a skill that develops in Milkman, as his character develops. The gradual emergence of meaning from the song the local children are singing in Shalimar reveals how his intuitive and spiritual abilities have improved (328). His eventual successful interpretation of the children's song leaves him feeling as if he has a new and

free life ahead of him. During his journey he has almost died and has had to face his guilt concerning Hagar (that will be discussed in the next paragraph) as well as having to extend his perspectives on life.

He sang all the way: " 'Solomon 'n Ryna Belali Shalut .  
.' "

'Where you learn that?' she [Sweet] asked him. 'That's a game we used to play when we was little.'

'Of course you did. Everybody did. Everybody but me. But I can play it now. It's my game now.'

The river in the valley was wide and green. Milkman took off his clothes, climbed a tree and dived into the water. He surfaced like a bullet, iridescent, grinning, splashing water. . . .

'He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam!' . . .

'Who you talkin 'bout?' Sweet was lying on her side, her cheek cupped in her hand.

'Solomon, that's who'

'Oh, him.' She laughed. 'You belong to that tribe of niggers?'. (327-328)

In this passage the reader is confronted with a character that is starkly different from the same one encountered up until this point in the novel. Milkman is joyous and uninhibited. He is oblivious to anything apart from his sense of freedom and power. He has the power to make different choices in his life. His outlook on his life is

different and he is amazed at this new life and energy he has acquired. He has claimed parts of his past that were missing. He claims the game Sweet used to play as a child as his own. Before he had been exposed to the new information he now has he did not realise that he missed having a history. As he freely strips naked so that he can immerse himself in water, he pays no attention to his clothes. At this point he does not want any extra baggage around him. He sheds the clothes that during his life have come to represent so much that was important to him, in terms of status and ego. Milkman embraces an individual with free, generous love as well as embracing his environment. His life starts to gain breadth. The path of his life has changed direction and is plotting itself along the kind of course that Pilate chose for hers. "[S]he tackled the problem of trying to *decide* how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her" (149).

At the beginning of this chapter it is mentioned that Milkman participates in a relationship with his cousin, Hagar. By the time Milkman leaves on his journey he has lost all respect for Hagar. He has called off the relationship in a way that he felt was acceptable and the following passage communicates his attitude toward Hagar just before he ends the relationship.

She [Hagar] was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make? (91)

It is clear from this extract that Milkman actively disrespects Hagar. He is absolutely aware of how he feels about her. After having hung around for years "because what difference does it make?" he decides to end the relationship. It is the manner in which he does this that hurts and damages Hagar so deeply that she spends the rest of her life trying to kill him. Milkman signs off the letter he writes to Hagar to end the relationship with her by saying, "I am signing this letter with love, of course, but more than that, with gratitude" (99). This condescending, arrogant and shockingly insensitive letter unleashes in Hagar a killer that she is unable to control. The cowardliness of this gesture is also arguably part of the reason for Hagar's extreme response to Milkman's rejection of her. It is interesting to note, however, that even though Milkman rejects Hagar in such a selfish manner it is her face he sees as he is strangled by Guitar.

The wire pressed into his neck then and took his breath. He thought he heard himself gurgling and saw a many-



colored burst of lights dancing before his eyes. When the music followed the colored lights, he knew he had drawn the last sweet air left for him in the world. Exactly the way he'd heard it would be, his life flashed before him, but it consisted of only one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love, in the most intimate sexual gesture imaginable. (279)

It is only in the face of death that he can appreciate the devotion and love Hagar showed him. The fact that it is her image that emerges at death also reveals that as a figure in his life, she has probably been the most important. She comes into his mind, no one else. It is Guitar, however, that gives the reader a very interesting perspective on Hagar's life. He comments on her childhood and also on the way she may have been parented. It is here that the reader also recognises weaknesses in Pilate's choices concerning her place in Hagar's life. Reba plays an active role here too. In the following passage Guitar is helping Hagar home after an unsuccessful attempt on Milkman's life. He is watching her and thinking about her.

Pretty little black-skinned woman. Who wanted to kill for love, die for love. The pride, the conceit of these doormat women amazed him. They were always women who had been spoiled children. Whose whims had been taken seriously by adults and who grew up to be the stingiest, greediest people on earth and out of their stinginess grew their stingy little love that ate everything in



sight. They could not believe or accept the fact that they were unloved; they believed that the world itself was off balance when it appeared as though they were not loved. (306)

Guitar's comments are highly perceptive and, for the reader, having access to his perspective on her life is very interesting if one considers their relative class positions. Both are poor, but Hagar is not explicitly aware of her poverty because her whims have always been indulged by her mother and her grandmother. Reba and Pilate sleep on mattress "ticking" whilst Hagar's bed has "sheets, a pillow and a pillow slip" (135). Both individuals can be classified as poor but Guitar has had to endure much higher levels of financial pressure than Hagar has. Pilate has always managed to make a living, and even though her life is simple there does not ever seem to be a real financial threat. Guitar has experienced an eviction and has faced the possibility of actually living on the street. It is from this perspective that Guitar views Hagar in the passage. He is able to relate to her as a human being in tremendous pain, but at the same time is aware of why this experience has caused her so much pain. He is an individual who has been downtrodden and rejected. Hagar has always been loved, indulged and considered. Hagar's willingness to die for what she considers "love" angers

Guitar as he views this version of love as something greedy and selfish. Earlier on in this passage he tells Hagar that the word "belong" should never, in his opinion, be used in talking about or thinking about a love relationship between two people." 'It's a bad word 'belong'. Especially when you put it with somebody you love" (306). Guitar's perspective on Hagar at this point prevents the reader from judging Milkman blindly. His treatment of her was cruel and arrogant, but he, as an individual, can choose whether he wants to love Hagar or not. His active and conscious disrespect toward her is represented as unacceptable, but Morrison presents the complexities that exist in this relationship by placing Guitar alongside Hagar in this passage.

The following novel to be discussed is vastly different in terms of context and geography, but to attempt a thorough and useful analysis of black, female experience Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* will be discussed while keeping the same issues at the centre of the discussion. The female character that we follow throughout the novel is African, and the links that exist between Africa and the United States will also be considered when examining the experiences of women in these two very different contexts.

## Chapter 2

The following chapter will examine Yvonne Vera's novel *Without a Name* (1994) as well as her earlier novel *Nehanda* (1993). A comparison will also be made between *Without a Name* (1994) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1988). According to Chandra Mohanty Third World women can be defined in terms of their geography as well as their sociohistorical positions. She argues in the Introduction to the collection of essays titled *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* that Black women in the United States can be incorporated into this "group".

But just as we [she and her fellow editors] have chosen to foreground 'third world women' as an analytical and political category in the title of this collection, I want to recognise and analytically explore the links among the histories and struggles of third world women against racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism, and monopoly capital. I am suggesting, then, an 'imagined community' of third world oppositional struggles. 'Imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of nation, calls 'horizontal comradeship'. (4)

Mohanty clearly feels that analysing the work of third world women from different contexts is a positive move towards solidarity. This kind of analysis is also important because it analyses the work of black women writers in terms of black women theorists. Often, when analysis is done, the writing of black women, particularly as far as feminist theory is concerned, is discussed in terms of traditional mainstream theory and literature. This chapter will attempt to make worthwhile and interesting links between the works of Vera and Morrison particularly, as well as other writers (where relevant).

Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* is a novel that primarily focuses on the experiences of a rural Zimbabwean young woman. This woman, Mazvita, decides to go on a journey, but her journey is very different to the one we witnessed with Milkman. By examining the dynamics of class, race and gender in this very different Zimbabwean setting, this explicitly third world context will be compared to the American context discussed from *Song of Solomon* in particular but also in other writing from the United States. The links that will be made between works discussed and cited will be made for the purpose of illustrating the existence of this "imagined community" that Mohanty discusses.

Poverty, and consequently class, in *Without a Name* is an aspect of life that is completely unavoidable for most of the characters that the reader encounters. As discussed in Chapter One, poverty and economic disadvantage form a critical part of black existence in general. Black people around the world have been economically oppressed because of racist colonial and political practices. In *Song of Solomon* Pilate chooses to live a simple life and this choice is meant to illustrate her richness of soul and spirit in relation to that of her brother. She is poor but this is of no real importance to her. She can still live the life she chooses to live. Her needs are met. Pilate's reality will be compared, at a later stage in this chapter, to that of Nehanda, in Vera's eponymous novel. Mazvita's choices and actions are largely motivated by the fact that she is poor. The execution of her ambitions, which lead to a journey to the city, as well as a difficult personal journey, concludes the way it does due to the fact that her choices are so limited by her social circumstances. Her life with Joel, the man she meets on arrival in the city and with whom she proceeds to live, is one of the compromises she needs to make because of her economic position. The condition of her poverty is also exacerbated by the fact that there is a war on. Her economic position is a consequence of

racist political policy that is being resisted by means of guerrilla methods. The following passage gives a description of urban life for black people in Zimbabwe at this time. Mazvita's economic and political position makes the situation described in Tungamirai's article, cited below, part of her reality when she decides to move to the city.

[In the city] [m]ost African families lived in the townships and unmarried men lived in the hostels in Harari township. The municipality by-laws forbade any unemployed person to live in the townships. Night raids were carried out by municipality police to check on unemployed persons who might have been given shelter by relatives. If people were caught sheltering there illegally they received summary punishment at police camps [. . .]. A fine of £1 and later \$2 was imposed and if not paid the captive remained in police custody. As the fine was often paid by employed relatives, they would soon evict their lodging relative, who would then be forced to seek accommodation in the squatter camps on the banks of the Mukuvisi River in Harare or go back to the rural areas. A woman could be forced to prostitute herself in order to find shelter. (Tungamirai 38)

This passage illustrates the precarious situation of people like Mazvita, caught between an oppressive system and a war that is supposed to free them from that oppression. The war curtails Mazvita's freedom by pushing her out of the rural areas into an urban situation that is dangerous in other ways. This results in her finding

herself in a position that is degrading as well as harmful to her. She essentially prostitutes herself to Joel (51) as she has no money and no relatives to depend on. The above passage reveals that many women in Harare at this time found themselves in similar positions. Arguably, Mazvita is able to find shelter because she is a woman, but her professional aspirations are also limited by this fact (58). The kinds of freedom that are important to Mazvita in this very particular social and political African context are closely related to this context and time, namely 1977 in Rhodesia.

The guerrilla war that had been going on for years in what was Rhodesia intensified in nineteen seventy-seven. People were tired of war and because of the nature of the war much of the activity took place in rural areas, which explains Mazvita's different perceptions of rural and urban people. This date is repeated throughout the novel and when reading about the war it emerges often as being significant. The following comment is made in the introduction of the collection of essays in volume one of the publication called *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (edited by Terence Ranger and Ngwabi Bhebe). The narrator in this passage is an individual who was abducted into guerrilla warfare.



The escalation of the liberation war in Rhodesia at the beginning of 1977 assumed a new character. More and more young people started to desert the country with the intention of joining the guerrilla warfare. Thus in January of the same year Manama Secondary School became one of the first schools to move *ad hoc* out of the country. The harassments by the Rhodesian army, hovering above our heads with spotter planes and helicopters, caused untold trepidation. It triggered mixed reactions. Some took cover, others cried, while some took to haphazard stampeding. (Ranger and Bhebe 10)

This passage helps to communicate the atmosphere that some people experienced. Mazvita in Vera's *Without a Name* is shown to be desperate to get out of the rural areas, as she does not feel safe from the war there. She says to Nyenyedzi that the war "is everywhere" in these rural areas (24). Danger was also present in these areas as political and military groups chose violent strategies of recruitment for guerrilla soldiers. One particular method used was called "press-ganging". The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) went through similar stages of recruitment, starting in the early nineteen sixties. This process began with voluntary recruitment and then moved on to a phase of forced recruitment, namely "press-ganging". The statement in the cited passage above was given by a man who was recruited in this way. This method was used at a time when both armed wings of the parties were forced to



recruit outside Rhodesia. Many of the men forced into training were living in the Mumbwa rural area as well as in Botswana. A problem resulting from this was that there were frequent desertions before, during and after training and after training some of these guerrillas surrendered to the Rhodesian Security Forces. This also led to many of these abducted guerrillas making press statements exposing how they were kidnapped as well as talking about party tactics and strategies which would have been harmful to the rebel forces (Tungamirai 40). These kinds of political tactics would obviously make a population feel terribly insecure as ordinary civilians were in danger of having their choices disregarded as well as literally being taken out of the country and away from their homes and families. The fear in people's eyes that Mazvita comments on in *Without a Name* (24) would have been a consequence of practices such as this. Bhebe and Ranger make a further comment on these violent practices which are still present on the Zimbabwean political scene today:

Here, then, was a deliberate recruitment policy . . . which did not focus on proletarian migrant workers but on a combination of peasant youths and half-volunteer, half-abducted school-children . . .". (Bhebe and Ranger 11)

It is this dangerous and uncertain situation that makes up a large part of Mazvita's decision to move to the city.

The journey that Mazvita embarks upon is one that has notions of independence and freedom at its centre. The following discussion is with Nyenyedzi, her lover in Kadoma. This passage illustrates Mazvita's state of mind at the beginning of her journey. She also relates some details of the rape she experienced one day after fetching water early in the morning. It is her experience of rape, which is not separated from her discussion of the war, that leads to her feelings of extreme insecurity and fear in her present location. This experience was the final catalyst for her decision to leave the rural areas.

'We must go back [home]. I want to meet your parents.'

'It is kind of you, Nyenyedzi, but it is hard to find words for certain things. I really must go to the city. One day I woke up in a mist, you know, the kind you enter with your shoulders. The morning seemed to rise from the ground, because the mist was so thick and spread slowly from the ground. Even the sun turns white at dawn, in that mist. My arms were heavy as I walked in that early morning to carry water from the river. I only had my arms, because my legs were buried in the mist, but I felt the mist moving upwards, towards my face. It was strange to walk separated like that. Then I felt something

pulling me down into the grass. This something pulled hard at my legs, till I fell down. I saw nothing, because the mist was so heavy. I tumbled through that mist, screaming into the grass. I had forgotten about my legs. It was a man that pulled me into that grass. He held a gun. I felt the gun, though I did not see it. After that experience, I decided to leave.'

They walked on, silently, along the path.

'We should live together and cook together,' Nyenyedzi said suddenly. 'This is a good place for us to live.'

'I cannot live here. We must go to the city and live there. I don't know if we are safe even in this place. The war is everywhere. We must go to the city. It is said there is no war there. Freedom has already arrived. Do you see the people who come from the city . . . they have no fear in their eyes. Look at how frightened we are here. Can freedom arrive here the way it has arrived in the city?' (23-24)

It is clear that Mazvita is in search of freedom and safety. She holds the war, as well as her rural circumstances and the political climate, partly responsible for the violation of her body. Her notion of freedom is based on her experience of people who live in the city. She reads their faces as fearless. In her mind, freedom is synonymous with city life. She cannot imagine feeling free and safe in her present rural setting as a result of the rape, possibly the ultimate deprivation of personal freedom a woman can experience. She risks losing the love of a gentle and sensitive man so that she can pursue her ambition. Her experience of rural life does

not allow her to even contemplate making a life with him in their present context. She will only consider a life with him if he relocates as well. She asserts herself here as she has made a decision that is highly relevant to her life experience and she refuses to compromise it. She says to Nyenyedzi that "[she] really *must* go to the city" (23) (my italics). She insists on it and does not hesitate to make her decision clear to him. He is unable to make her change her mind.

Ironically, she is 'forced' into making compromises that are fundamentally hazardous to her hopes for independence, as well as to her sense of self, which she had previously been so sure of. Contrasting the possible life Mazvita could have had with Nyenyedzi with the life she finds in Harare reveals the enormous risks some individuals, like Mazvita, take in challenging their circumstances. It is clear, too, that Mazvita's challenges are all the more risky due to the fact that she is a woman. As stated earlier, her professional choices are severely limited and there is no mention of her having received any formal education.

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* opportunities for education of black women in Zimbabwe's rural areas are represented as small and in many cases

simply non-existent, as education is viewed as being much more important for males. The main female character in the novel initially loses out on an education to her brother. He is arrogant and takes his opportunity for granted. It is only because of his death that Tambu ends up with the chance to study.

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are reasons for this more than the mere consequence of age. Therefore I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. (Dangarembga 1)

She cannot help feeling glad of Nhamo's (her brother's) death, as she had been trying desperately to earn the money to pay for an education herself. The education she obtains is not begrudged her, but because the family could only afford to send one child to school, that opportunity was automatically given to a son, since it was (and still is in many cases) believed that that would be money better spent. Tambu acknowledges that without the education she received she would not have had the tools to write the book she narrates directly to the reader. Had Nhamo lived, Tambu might have found herself

in circumstances very similar to Mazvita's (in *Without a Name*), as both lived in poor rural areas. This can be assumed to result in women's options being limited to working as domestic servants, which Mazvita refuses to do and which Tambu narrowly escapes. This refusal on Mazvita's part is an assertion of what she perceives as her rights, but it is also a decision that will contribute to the desperate state she finds herself in by the end of the novel. She chooses a professional life over a marriage and family. Nyenyedzi offers her a traditional life that she rejects. She also believes that she will enjoy more freedom in the city (24). For a single woman this venture is a brave yet dangerous one.

The description that Mazvita offers to Nyenyedzi about her rape differs in certain details from her internal remembrances of that experience which are communicated to the reader by the narrator. While she is with Nyenyedzi and while her body is being loved as something that cannot be separated from her self, she can speak of this experience openly. She is trying to communicate her reasons for leaving to Nyenyedzi so that he can really understand them. His response is to offer her a life that he perceives as being safe and secure: to "live" and "cook" together is what his remedy for the situation would be. In her article titled "*Without a Name:*

reclaiming that which has been taken", Ruth Lavelle argues that Nyenyedzi's desire to stay on the land in the rural areas is also a political one, just as is Mazvita's desire to move.

Nyenyedzi will not leave the land because he wants to fight for it, and also because he is afraid that if he rejects the land, it will in turn reject him (39). He cannot fathom why Mazvita is not content to be under the power of the land, to allow it to 'hold' (33) her. Nyenyedzi does not understand that Mazvita is tired of being claimed, that she wants to claim something for herself now. (Lavelle 111)

Vera's novel illustrates that Mazvita does not want any part of herself to be claimed. Many Zimbabwean men were able to identify with the war because they were the ones that were needed to fight. Mazvita becomes a victim of this war when she is raped. Nyenyedzi is still able to identify with it because he has not experienced violation in the same way as Mazvita has, and so he has no real issue with being attached to something that Mazvita rejects.

The experience of this rape makes Mazvita's perceptions of her geography completely different from those of Nyenyedzi. The danger of her location is felt on her body. The various descriptions of the rape are revealing



if one pays attention to how Mazvita perceives her body, as well as how she thinks of her body in relation to the rapist. In the passage cited from *Without a Name* she describes the rapist as being a "man" with a "gun". These are the two aspects of him that are important in allowing Mazvita to describe this experience out loud. In the following passage in which Mazvita thinks over this experience it is the voice of the rapist that traumatises her.

The silence cleansed her.

Mazvita gathered the whispering he had spread between her legs, over her arms, over her face. She ran far into the mist but the whispering, a frightful memory, encompassed her. She gathered the whispering into a silence that she held tightly within her body. She sheltered in the silence. The silence was hers, though he had initiated it. The silence was a quietness in her body, a deafness to the whispering that escaped from the lips of the stranger. . . He whispered as though he offered her life, in gentle murmuring tones, unhurried, but she felt his arms linger too long over her thighs, linger searchingly and cruelly, and she knew that if there was life offered between them, it was from herself to him - not offered, but taken. (28)

In both passages the mist is an important agent of obscurity. She and the rapist are concealed by the mist and it is, therefore, one of the factors that allows this crime to happen. In the previous passage it also



functions to conceal them but it functions, too, as a screen or divider that makes her feel as if certain parts of her body have been separated from others. She does not feel as if she has any legs and says that the only body parts she is able to use are her arms. If one follows this description one can see that in her mind she has separated her vagina, the specific place of the barbaric violation, from the rest of her body. If her legs are not part of herself then what happens to them, or between them, is separate from the operational parts of her body. In both passages the experience is a highly physical one. In the above passage the rapist's whispers are actually felt. They penetrate her body along with his physical penetration of her. She consciously silences these terrifying and displaced whispers. The act is so violent that the whispering voice of the rapist is seen as completely displaced and confusing, which adds to the trauma of the experience. The first memory that she wants to silence is the sound of the rapist's whispering voice, not the feeling of his body on hers. In the first passage Mazvita says to Nyenyedzi that she "tumbled through that mist, screaming into the grass" (23). However, even that description seems quiet as she relates it to Nyenyedzi. The rapist's whispers add terror to the experience, not simply because of the manner of speech, but also by what he is actually saying. The violence of the action is

accentuated by the false "excuses" that the rapist communicates to Mazvita as he tries to project responsibility onto her. Even as she thinks over this traumatic event, she is able to place complete blame on the rapist. His "gentle", "murmuring tones" did not agree with the violence his body was committing and she is able to recognise this. She acknowledges that it was an act against life, against her life specifically. The experience is obviously not separate from her psychically, however - the result of this trauma makes her feel as if she is literally falling apart.

It is very interesting to examine this notion also in terms of Morrison's work. The ghost of the baby girl in the novel *Beloved* can be linked in fascinating ways with the character of Mazvita, as well as having similarities with Mazvita's child, which is never given a name. The following passage from Morrison's *Beloved* reveals Beloved's feelings in relation to her having been abandoned, (as she perceives or is imagined as perceiving it). If one assumes that Beloved is an adult manifestation of Sethe's murdered daughter (or of the way she is imagined), one can understand that some of the baggage left from her very short life would be a fear of abandonment. She experiences this fear physically, just

as Mazvita experiences the trauma of rape. Both feel as if their bodies have, or will, divide into pieces.

Beloved, who had not moved since Sethe and Paul D left the room, sat sucking her forefinger. Denver watched her face awhile and then said, 'She likes him [Paul D] here.' Beloved went on probing her mouth with her finger. 'Make him go away,' she said.

'She might be mad at you if he leaves.' Beloved, inserting a thumb in her mouth along with the forefinger, pulled out a back tooth. There was hardly any blood, but Denver said, 'Ooooh, didn't that hurt you?'

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed. (133)

Beloved is desperate for Sethe's undivided attention and if she does not receive this she becomes chronically insecure. The passage reveals the extent of her fear. Her fear is translated into a physical fear of actually falling apart. When an intense trauma is experienced by an individual this trauma almost certainly manifests itself physically. People do not literally fall apart, but they often feel that they should, since internally the parts or pieces of themselves seem to have

disintegrated. Depressed people find it physically difficult to get out of bed. They do not have the strength, physically and psychologically. By the end of Mazvita's journey (in *Without a Name*) her body is still undergoing the process of disintegration. As she walks toward the bus that will take her home with her murdered child, her body is described as follows:

A violent wind carried Mazvita forward.

No one noticed or remembered her. Mazvita was sure of her direction so she started to walk. Her footsteps were jerky and faltering. She walked. She walked sideways, because her left shoulder leaned forward. It was her broken side. Her bones spread in splintered fragments, across her back. She leaned farther sideways and felt, once more, her bones fall against each other. Her bones built a mountain on her back.

Mazvita. Her back was broken. (35)

The journey that Mazvita was so sure of has broken her. Her experiences in the city and with Joel have led to her experiencing damage that she cannot seem to overcome. Her broken bones "[have] built a mountain on her back" (35). The fact that the bulk of her burden, as well as the dead child, are placed on her back, is symbolic. These experiences in the city will be carried as a burden forever and the finality of the statement "[h]er back was broken" resonates like a verdict that is final. While

commenting on burdens, it is important to examine the two largest burdens that Sethe (in *Beloved*) and Mazvita carry. Both Sethe and Mazvita murder their babies. Arguably, their reasons are quite similar, as both women are highly restricted in their choices because of their political positions within society. Sethe is a slave on the run. The only reason why she is not taken back to "Sweet Home" is because "Schoolteacher" actually saw her attempt to kill all of her children. She knew that if she didn't take some kind of action her children would be made slaves as well. When explaining her reasons to Paul D in *Beloved* she says: "I stopped him [Schoolteacher] . . . I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, *Beloved* 164). Mazvita is unable to care for herself, let alone her baby, by the end of *Without a Name*. Emotionally she is not coping and her thoughts on her journey home to bury her child, cited below, reveal this.

It was the stillness on her back, cloying and persistent, which bothered her, choked her, sent a small painful echo tearing across her breast, turned her lips a burning black clay, clinging and cold. She felt her eyes sink into the darkness gathered somewhere beneath her forehead, beneath the eyebrows, a still cold darkness in which she was sure there was no recovery. (99)

Unlike Sethe, she is unable to "beat back the past" (Morrison, *Beloved* 73) - as Sethe for a long time has been so good at doing. Mazvita's past is too recent and her dead child is still in her physical possession. At this point she cannot conceive of healing or of being able to put her experiences behind her. These experiences have lodged themselves in and on her back. She feels them as a physical pain, just as she feels the presence of her dead child on her back, "the stillness" (99), as a physically painful sensation. Her trauma at this point is part of her present, whilst Sethe's trauma is located in her past, even though this moves into her present in the form of "rememories" (Morrison *Beloved* 23). Sethe's thoughts are firmly located in the present, as the hope of a future is too dangerous a thought, and the past too painful a memory. She has managed to live through her past as she has had important things to live for, such as Denver, her daughter, and Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law. Justifying herself to *Beloved* towards the end of the novel nearly kills her as her focus becomes entirely fixed on *Beloved* and this daughter's (imagined and insatiable) desires. However, love from the community, as well as efforts from Denver and Paul D, allow her eventually to begin to become free of this. Mazvita cannot fathom a future in which she is alive. At the very end of *Without a Name* she thinks: "She would bury her

child in Mubaira, then she would die" (98). The killing of her child is not separate from the vision she has of her own death. This death is her choice, and she states that this is one of the "brave pronouncements" that she is still capable of making (98).

In the novel *Beloved* the "crawling already?" (94) baby girl never has her name mentioned. The reader only knows her as "Beloved" because that is what is written on her headstone and that is what the girl who appears on the tree stump calls herself. Sethe wanted to have the phrase "Dearly Beloved" carved into the stone, but she could not afford it. She had to endure "[t]en minutes [of sex with the engraver] for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too?" (5). In her mind, at this time, the most important word to describe this child is the word "beloved": "But what she got she settled for, was the one word that mattered" (5). It is the "size" of Sethe's love for her child that causes her to omit the child's name from the gravestone. The way she feels about the child, the fact that she prioritises her feelings of the child's worth over its name reveals the nature of her love for this child. Sethe describes her love for the child as "powerful" (4) and Paul D describes it as "too thick" (164).

In *Without a Name* it is Mazvita's ambivalence towards her child, rather than intense love, that prevents her from naming it at all. Her feelings toward it are tainted because she is not certain who the father is. (By the end of the novel she feels sure that the baby was begotten by Nyenyedzi.) Ruth Lavelle comments on the possibility of the child having been conceived during the rape (112). Vera does not, however, make the identity of the father clear. The following passage from *Without a Name* suggests that the child belongs to Joel, but this suggestion is not maintained throughout the novel. It also reveals the way Mazvita perceives the pregnancy - as a betrayal of her body against herself. She feels that her body made a choice that her mind and psyche had not permitted.

Joel. A stirring, of nausea, circling and turning. Mazvita lay still on the bed. It was dark in the room. She lay still and tried to bury the child inside her body. Mazvita buried the child. She would keep the child inside her body, not give birth to it. Joel must not discover that her body had betrayed them like this . . . She had not thought the right thoughts to keep this child away. How could she have conceived the child without some knowledge in the matter? (*Without a Name* 64)

The result of this pregnancy is that Joel throws Mazvita out. He no longer wishes to live with her and does not believe that the child is his. Mazvita's inability to



control her body, as well as the implications of this pregnancy, shatter her ambitions. Her initial method of coping with the realisation of this pregnancy predicts the death of the child. She has "buried" the child before it has been born. She never associates its birth with life, and the birth of the child signals the start of her loss of hope as well as the accelerated deterioration of her life. Her limited access to freedom is now almost completely erased. She realises that the freedom she craved so desperately is not actually available at all, even though she had been suspecting this for some time. Once she is in the city and has observed the lives of people in the streets, she realises that she, as well as these people, have been "naïve . . . about freedom" (45). Her first impressions of the city felt like freedom to her. The city seemed "purposeful" and "unapologetic" (46). Soon she realises that it feels purposeful but really is ruthlessly unapologetic. It tempts and entices with superficial images. The "unapologetic" stance taken by the city, as Mazvita perceives it, is unapologetic in a harsh way rather than in a strong and independent way. It is not assertive, but is unapologetic in a manner that forces every individual into a state of anonymity. The city also sells freedom, to women as well as to men. This sale of freedom is echoed by the reality that many women are forced to sell themselves to survive. Most

prostitutes have to appear as women do in advertisements. The following passage discusses how images of freedom are sold in the city, and this passage attempts to highlight the destructive function that this form of advertising creates.

Men heated metal, close-toothed Afro combs and lifted their hair from the scalp, the women, who already knew freedom was purchasable walked into glittering *Ambi* shops and bought their prepared Afro wigs. Thus clad, they asserted an inchoate independence. Independence was memory and style. Black had never been as beautiful as when it married slavery with freedom. (47)

Here Mazvita is noticing the result of the blending of a form of Western consumer culture with the traditional culture that has adapted to an urban environment. The culture she observes is completely different from the one she knew and is also different from what she had expected. The final sentence of the passage is an interesting one. The tone of the statement is highly ironic, as it is obvious that slavery still exists, even though it may be in a different form. But this slavery, such as Mazvita's inability to escape from her social and political circumstances, can surely not be combined with freedom. It combines itself with a false perception of freedom, which is terribly dangerous for individuals who believe that this illusion is real. Mazvita is,

therefore, acutely aware of the ironic use of the metaphor of marriage in the passage quoted above. She can recognise her naivety as well as that of many others.

This chapter attempted to analyse and expose fascinating and significant links between an African female writer and an African American female writer. It is an attempt to establish the imagined community of third world women that Mohanty discusses in the introduction cited at the beginning of this chapter.

## Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to discuss a poem by Audre Lorde that is untitled and was never published. She read it in a commencement address at Oberlin College in 1989. Chandra Mohanty uses it to introduce the collection of essays in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*.

The US and the USSR are the most  
powerful countries  
in the world  
but only 1/8 of the world's population.  
African people are also 1/8 of the world's  
population.  
Of that, ¼ is Nigerian.  
½ of the world's population is Asian.  
½ of that is Chinese.

There are 22 nations in the middle east.

Most people in the world  
are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female  
Non-Christian  
and do not speak english.

By the year 2000  
the 20 largest cities in the world  
will have one thing in common  
none of them will be in Europe  
none in the United States (1)

In this poem Lorde is challenging the current  
hierarchical structures in the world, as well as stating

that mainstream or conventional perceptions of these structures are both blatantly misleading and dangerously inaccurate. The capitalist world economy is run by a relative minority, and because of this other nations and cultures have had to buy into a system that is, in many instances, very different from any system they may have chosen for themselves. Western, Christian, white states assume that they are the majority and perceive the world from a western perspective. The fact that this culture dominates the global culture at present has led to oppressed and repressed cultures attempting to adopt the culture that they also view as dominant. In *Without a Name* as well as *Song of Solomon* there are explicit examples of how individuals from oppressed sections of society attempt to adopt a Western style or structure for their personal or professional lives. Whether those people are the majority in that country or not does not make much of a difference. These people realise that to succeed within this global system means that one needs to adapt to it. If one thinks about the current craze to learn English in Asian countries, such as Japan and Taiwan, it is clear that these nations are attempting to access a culture as well as an economic system that is dominated by the English language. Lorde's poem alerts us to the fact that Asian people make up half of the world's population. Why are western cultures not making an

attempt to learn Asian languages? Lorde's point seems to be that the attempt to sustain such a precariously unbalanced system is eventually going to fail. Her list of facts grows as one reads through the poem and the tone of finality conveyed in the last few lines reads as a kind of proclamation. Control and power will continue to shift away from the hegemons that are named at the beginning of the poem.

Characters in the novels that have been discussed in this thesis are all fighting within systems that want to dominate them. The novels offer various perspectives on what life is like if you are a member of the largest population group, namely all those that are "Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female/, Non-Christian/and [non-English]". Characters such as Pilate can "fly" and are able to transcend their oppressive situations in many ways. Mazvita is less successful. The system, as well as the situation, kills her.

It is interesting to read Lorde's poem in relation to the following passage from *Beloved*. Baby Suggs is talking about white people. Her perspectives on white people come out of her experience of being a slave in hideously oppressive circumstances. In the passage she is having a conversation with Sethe. It is Denver who is remembering

this conversation as she contemplates her first solo venture into the world outside number 124 Bluestone Road.

How would she [Denver] know these places? What was more - much more - out there were whitepeople and how could you tell about them? Sethe said the mouth and sometimes the hands. Grandma Baby said there was no defense - they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did.

'They got me out of jail' Sethe once told Baby Suggs.

'They also put you in it,' she answered.

'They drove you 'cross the river.'

'On my son's back.'

'They gave you this house.'

'Nobody gave me nothing.'

'I got a job from them.'

'He got a cook from them, girl.'

'Oh, some of them do right by us.'

'And every time it's a surprise, ain't it?'

'You didn't used to talk this way.'

'Don't box with me. There's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout.'

(244)

Baby Suggs's perspectives on power relations within society differ enormously from Lorde's contemporary perspective on the global cultural, political and economic situation. Baby Suggs cannot fathom the reality that Lorde comments on. She believes that the battle is



over and that white, European-based cultures have already won. The contest is over. Baby Suggs's cynicism is drawn from her personal experience, but by placing the poem alongside this passage, the plight of black people that Baby envisions is shifted and the future for traditionally marginalised people looks different from the one that Baby Suggs describes.

The fact that all four novels dealt with in this thesis can be linked so significantly together reveals a commonality of culture and experience that can unite people who have suffered in political systems that do not adequately accommodate them. Expanding this analysis to include both African and American black experience is significant in thinking about the global machine that people of colour (women especially) come up against daily, in all spheres of life. The poem links people of colour and demonstrates the possibility of their achieving fulfilment despite the domination of white cultures. All four novels are concerned with the experiences of individuals within societies that marginalise them. The illustration of various ways in which such people cope with the difficulties of their situations informs the reader about the prejudiced systems from a perspective that is also discussed from the point of view of those on the margin. The aim of this

thesis is to centralise these perspectives. In all four novels it is the conventionally "mainstream" perspective that is read or represented as foreign, strange and often incomprehensible. The characters discussed, as well as the theorists cited, are the central voices. Their enormous significance in the literary canon as a whole must be acknowledged if we, as readers and thinkers, are going to have a more adequate perspective on literature, culture, gender and class.

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